Public Assistance Mission

While the Sacramento District grappled with the individual assistance mission, the San Francisco District took charge of the public assistance effort for FEMA. FEMA's public assistance program provides federal grant assistance for the repair, replacement, or restoration of disaster-damaged publicly owned facilities and certain private nonprofit facilities. Grants are provided on a 75/25 percent federal/nonfederal cost sharing basis. Eligible applicants include the state and any county, city, village, town, or other political subdivision of the state, as well as private nonprofit organizations or institutions that own and operate certain educational, utility, emergency, or medical facilities or that provide essential government service.

Work that is eligible for federal grant assistance is classified as either emergency or permanent.

- Emergency work must be performed immediately to save lives, ensure public health and safety, and protect property.
- Permanent work includes repair or restoration of public roads and streets, water control facilities (such as dams and levees) owned or maintained by an eligible applicant, public office buildings, utility distribution systems (such as sewage treatment plants), public parks, and recreational facilities. Damaged facilities are restored to their predisaster condition and design, subject to applicable codes, standards, and specifications.[74]

In Mission Assignment Letter #2, FEMA requested that the Corps provide inspectors to assess damage and conduct initial inspections. The inspectors would prepare damage survey reports (DSRs) according to FEMA regulations and deliver those reports directly to the disaster field office for FEMA review and distribution to the state of California. When the governor's authorized representative notified FEMA and the Corps that work covered by the damage

survey report was completed, Corps inspectors would make additional surveys as necessary to confirm that the work in the original project application had been completed. They worked with state counterpart agencies to ensure that each FEMA-approved site where damage exceeded $25,000 was inspected by a federal and/or state official and that the completed work complied with the approved scope of work and the FEMA engineering analysis. The inspections, conducted jointly with the appropriate state counterpart inspectors, were to begin within 7 days of Corps notification and were to be completed within 30 days.

The mission assignment letter specified that reimbursement be limited to $600,000 unless the FEMA regional director approved additional expenses by amending the original mission assignment letter. To obtain additional obligating authority, the Corps had to submit a request for additional funding based on projected need and an estimate of the revised total cost of the project. In mid-November, FEMA increased funding for the public assistance/damage survey report mission from $600,000 to $3 million and later to $3.5 million.[75]

In previous response efforts, FEMA had directed the public assistance program itself, using Corps personnel to do the inspections. FEMA followed the same approach after the earthquake. But on 25 October, Bruce Baughman, who had been sent from FEMA headquarters in Washington to head the public assistance program, asked the Corps to manage the entire operation to include training, equipping, and deploying inspectors. FEMA retained ultimate responsibility and signatory authority.

Baughman decided to put the Corps in charge of the entire public assistance mission in part because of the many inspectors requiring supervision. He also understood that the Corps preferred to be given the freedom to decide how to accomplish a mission and to set its own standards. Culp and other Corps officials were predisposed to take on the entire mission. They felt they could respond more effectively and exert better control if given a standard and allowed to organize as they saw fit to accomplish a mission. And, with its resources already strained by Hurricane Hugo,

FEMA did not have the staff to manage the public assistance program.[76]

Corps officials established a goal of a 2 percent error rate and offered to have Corps personnel do the quality assurance to achieve this rate. FEMA officials rejected the offer, indicating that they would do the final check. Corps officials decided to establish their own quality assurance section even though FEMA would perform another review.[77]

During that first weekend, Coffey and other Sacramento District staff developed a plan for tackling the public assistance/damage survey mission. On Sunday night, 22 October, they explained their plan to General Sobke and received his approval. At that point, Colonel Coffey and Helga Grahl quickly drove to Santa Clara to establish a base for damage survey reports. Baughman approved the structure that the Corps created to accomplish the mission.[78]

Meanwhile, Edward Hecker met with Bruce Baughman, Roy Gorup, and Daryl Waite, the FEMA public assistance staff. FEMA tasked USACE with providing an additional 25 DSR inspectors, bringing the total to 60. Training for the first phase (35 inspectors) would take place on Wednesday, 25 October, and for the second phase (25 inspectors) on Thursday, 26 October. FEMA also tasked the Corps with providing two to four specialized DSR inspectors for the Port of Oakland Marine Terminal and Metropolitan Oakland International Airport, with expertise in evaluating damage to the port's heavy cranes as well as in doing the damage survey report for the runway.[79]

FEMA began doing damage survey reports on 22 October and conducted the first public assistance applicant briefings the next day. Public assistance procedures were well defined. As soon as some preliminary damage assessments were complete, FEMA held public forums for city and county officials to explain procedures for requesting and obtaining public assistance. All public and private organizations within that geographic or political jurisdiction could attend. FEMA officials distributed a two-inch thick packet of forms, which included a one-page form called a "notice of intent" on which applicants indicated the type of damage that their property had sustained. FEMA explained how to fill out the forms and the attendees returned them at the end of the meeting.

After the meeting, FEMA entered the information into a computer database at the disaster field office as a notice of intent and assigned an identification number that corresponded to the agency submitting the notice. Then FEMA passed the notices on to the Corps for coordination. A team composed of one federal representative (Corps or contractor) and one state representative, notice of intent in hand, then visited the agency applicant and started to assess the scope of the damage and write the damage survey report. This appointment was critical because at that point the Corps started compiling the report, which contained both engineering estimates and documentation provided by the applicant.

Corps officials could not determine from the original notice of intent how many damage survey reports would be required or the scope of the work or the number of inspectors required. The notice indicated the type of discipline needed (such as structural engineering, plumbing) but beyond that provided little information. For example, if the applicant checked off "roads" on the form, it could indicate damage to 18 miles of roads or 40 miles. The report provided the scope of work and the cost estimate that became the basis for grant funding.[80]

The Corps established three sites (San Francisco, Mountain View, and Santa Cruz), each with a station chief who was responsible for managing the DSR missions within a particular geographic area. This was a command and control cell in charge of all the individual inspection teams. The station chiefs, in turn, reported to the damage survey report chief, Lieutenant Colonel Coffey.

The 128 teams produced over 6,000 damage survey reports with a value exceeding $25 million. A quality assurance/quality control team reviewed each report. Corps involvement in this process continued until spring 1990.[81]

As Corps personnel executed the damage survey reports, they sent them to a FEMA public assistance officer for approval. No two reports were alike, and quality became a problem. The Corps had to verify its initial guidance on filling out the damage survey report with the FEMA reviewers to ensure that they agreed. The Corps' internal review process apparently worked well, for FEMA accepted

A Corps of Engineers inspector surveys wreckage at the Pacific Garden Mall in Santa Cruz, California.

95 to 96 percent of the damage survey reports the first time they were submitted.[82]

Not all inspectors were adequately trained. A June 1988 memorandum of agreement between the Corps and FEMA specified that each engineer division create a cadre of personnel who could write damage survey reports, but in return, FEMA would help provide training. Although each Corps division was linked with a FEMA region for training, not all FEMA regions provided that training. Sometimes if an engineer division spanned more than one FEMA region, no one took responsibility for training.[83]

FEMA later waived the requirement that inspectors be trained before they arrived and indicated that inspectors had to be trained only before they went into the field. The Corps in conjunction with FEMA conducted a four-hour training session for DSR inspectors. But the training was inadequate, in part because FEMA had no instruction manuals available for inspectors. In November 1988, some federal statutes had changed, and FEMA was in the process of printing new manuals reflecting these changes. FEMA has no uniform standards or guidelines for training across the country.[84]

Without adequate training and guidance, Corps inspectors had difficulty estimating costs. Corps officials charged that FEMA standards for estimating costs were inconsistent and did not reflect the local market. For example, repairing a brick wall in Santa Cruz was cheaper than repairing one in San Francisco, but FEMA standards did not reflect this. The limits that FEMA placed on repair costs also created problems. Although the amount of acceptable costs was an issue that FEMA and the applicant had to resolve, the DSR teams were at times caught in the middle. FEMA apparently had regulations that outlined what it would reimburse, but it had not yet put out guidance that defined and clarified its criteria.[85]

Corps officials complained that FEMA's guidance changed continually. Without site-specific or consistent standards, Lieutenant Colonel Coffey observed, there was no agreement on proper costs. What was acceptable kept changing, and FEMA officials at the three different stations were not in accord. They returned rejected estimates to frustrated inspectors who then had to go back to the agency applicant. As a result, their credibility suffered.

Baughman, however, denied that the cost amounts listed on the disaster survey reports were ever changed at the disaster field office during his tenure and disputed the idea that discrepancies occurred in authorized prices. He claimed that FEMA used a standard unit price list, developed with state concurrence. If a local jurisdiction proved that its costs were greater than the standard costs, the costs were altered.[86]

During the first two weeks, managing the personnel coming in from other districts and divisions posed a problem. Planning was hampered by lack of any advance notice of how many people would be reporting and the absence of any uniform, mandatory period of service. The Sacramento District staff successfully processed and deployed 300 inspectors, but the processing took place outside the disaster area so hotel rooms were available. Providing for the DSR inspectors inside the disaster area was more difficult.[87]

Public assistance/disaster survey work was more detailed and required more training than did habitability inspections, so it was difficult to move inspectors back and forth between programs. In only a few instances could Corps officials divert

personnel from individual assistance to public assistance work. Only 45 to 50 of the 300 individual assistance inspectors were qualified and trained to do damage survey reports. Once the inspectors were in the field, it was not feasible to switch them from one program to another. After giving the individual assistance and public assistance missions to separate districts, the Corps was unable to transfer resources between the two missions because each district wanted to retain control of its resources.[88]

Chief of Engineers LTG Henry Hatch talks with Corps inspectors in Watsonville, California.

Coffey recommended that in the future the Corps provide a civilian personnel officer located outside the disaster area to manage and assign its personnel. Inside the disaster area, officials were too busy setting up an organization, conducting training, and providing logistics support. For future disaster responses, Coffey also proposed that the Corps deploy a management structure, organized in teams, each with a head and an administrative assistant. For example, the Santa Cruz office had three people from the Corps' Missouri River Division who operated as a unit. Coffey plugged them

as a management cell to supervise 26 teams. He recommended that the Corps prepackage management structures for disaster field offices composed of emergency operating personnel from the districts.[89]